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The Philippines: Status and Implications
of the Lawrence Kidnapping

American Presbyterian missionary Brian Lawrence was released unharmed by his Moslem rebel captors on 18 July after six days in captivity. President Aquino has told the US Embassy that the negotiating team that secured Lawrence's release was led by Tarhata Lucman, a local Moslem princess, and Maj. Gen. Jose Magno, the ranking Philippine military commander on the island of Mindanao. Magno has told the press that punitive operations have been launched against the kidnappers and that criminal charges will be filed.

The circumstances of Lawrence's abduction and subsequent release underscores the tension that exists on Mindanao between the government and local Moslem politicians, some of whom remain loyal to former President Marcos.

- According to Embassy and press reports, Lawrence's kidnapping is generally believed to have been staged by Marcos loyalist Mohamad Ali Dimaporo and his nephew Ismail. The Embassy, however, has no evidence that Mohamad Ali--who remained in Manila during the episode and denies any connection to the kidnappers--played a role in securing Lawrence's release.
- Lawrence has told the Embassy that he believes his kidnappers were protesting the dismissal of local officials by the Aquino government and their replacement with others who are considered unqualified or unrepresentative by the local population. Both Tarhata Lucman and Mohamad Ali Dimaporo--each of whom became involved in the Lawrence case for political reasons--covet a local governorship that each has held previously and which is now held by an Aquino appointee.

The kidnappers' earlier demand for Moslem independence has apparently motivated Aquino to renew attention to the issue, but confusion among Moslem separatist groups will delay any moves toward implementing the 1976 Tripoli Agreement--which promised autonomy for the predominantly Moslem areas of Mindanao.

- Early press reports identified Lawrence's captors as members of the Mindanao Independence Movement, a splinter group of the secessionist Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). The group initially demanded enforcement of the Tripoli Agreement in return for Lawrence's release.
- Subsequent press reports state that Aquino--in response to Lawrence's kidnapping and the abduction of several others at the hands of Moslem rebels over the past several months--has formed a government committee to study the political problems engendered by the Moslems in Mindanao. Additional press reports quote palace advisors as saying that Aquino has appointed her brother-in-law, Agapito "Butz" Aquino, as chief negotiator in discussions that will be opened with MNLF head Nur Misuari.
- Factionalism and a declining support base--which have afflicted Moslem rebel groups over the past decade--will nevertheless prevent rapid progress in any talks with the government. Moslem separatists will remain an irritant but not a direct threat to the Aquino government.

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